

Confessions of a Palaeographer

I've often heard this common adage on palaeography: It's not a science. It's an art. When I joined the Penn Manuscript Collective as a freshman, I knew next to nothing about palaeography except that it was really hard. I wanted to learn to be as methodical and precise as possible. In other words, I thought of an exercise of palaeography as I would a math problem. I wanted to solve manuscripts, and if I could not get one piece to fit, I considered the whole effort useless.

What are the qualifications for something to be an art, and not a science? Does that mean that there must be room for interpretation, and for multiple interpretations to be valid? If so, palaeography only fits because of its inexactitude; there is almost always a "correct" reading, even if we are never to know what it is.

Is it the act of organic creation? Palaeography would seem to crumple even more at this standard. Palaeography is the work of imitation. It destroys the uniqueness of the writing, does away with the incomprehensible minims, curly-que tails and manicules, and converts a string of sentences into regimented Times New Roman-ed lines. It is a replacement process that, even at its best, will always reduce the nuance of the manuscript.

None of this explains why palaeography is so popular, or why anyone would want to start a palaeography club. The stated mission of the Penn Manuscript Collective is to introduce manuscripts, material text research and palaeography to the Penn community. And that it has—for me, and for others. But I believe it has a second, equally crucial, function. Palaeography done alone can quickly become science-like, deferring to rigid rules of the palaeographer's design. But attempting to practice palaeography in a group reveals its rightful place as an art.

The reason: People disagree. They see different meanings in the sizing of the address of a letter, in the placement of a name next to an illustration, in the italic font used for one place but

not another. Decisions that might have been made at the palaeographer's complacent whim become active, resembling the interpretation work of a scholarly annotator. Each choice negates the possibility of other choices that could have been made. Before the scrutiny of a group, a manuscript comes to life in all its potentiality.

The art of palaeography lies in the gap between the word written on paper or parchment, and the capabilities of word processors. The individual letters within a transcription are merely symbols for the letters within a manuscript, the spacing and layout merely symbols for the landscape of a page. But that does not make the work of the palaeographer any less essential than that of a literary critic. This mission propels us to engage with these luminous texts.

So, in this outstanding collection of projects, both material and palaeographic, consider the work a creative guide to the manuscript, and not a representation of it. This lesson I would not have learned without the energy of the Manuscript Collective challenging me at every turn.